

VIRGINIA WILDLIFE

NOVEMBER 2004

TWO DOLLARS



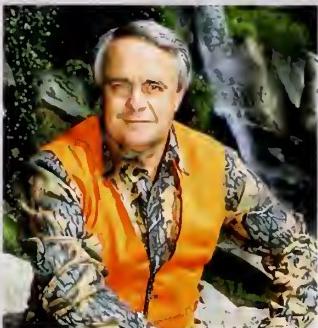


William L. Woodfin, Jr

One of the most frequent requests we receive at the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries is from people wanting to know where to hunt. And while we have nearly 200,000 acres of public land owned by the Department—paid for by sportsmen and women's dollars—we continue to look for ways to provide additional opportunities to participate in and enjoy hunting and fishing.

Along those lines, we are pleased to announce a new program that opens additional lands for public use. Public Access Land for Sportsmen (PALS) is a first for the Commonwealth. Through this cooperative private/public program the Department is now able to open more than 19,000 acres of private land in Dickenson County to public hunting, fishing and trapping. The property is owned by Heartwood Forestland Fund IV and managed by The Forestland Group, LLC.

The new hunting area, located between State Highway 63 and State Route 600 (Frying Pan Creek Road), will be called the Coalfield PALS Area. The Forestland Group, LLC manages the property using sustainable forestry techniques to produce forest products. This management approach incorporates best management practices and wildlife management activities. The property reportedly offers excellent turkey and grouse hunting, as well as good small game and deer hunting.



In the licensing agreement, the Department will manage access for hunting, fishing and trapping. In order to be admitted on the property, hunters, anglers and trappers will need a special permit. The \$12.50 permit will be valid beginning October 1, 2004, through June 30, 2005, and can be purchased at the VDGIF Marion Regional Office, 1796 Highway Sixteen, Marion, VA 24354. Inquiries should be directed to Regional Wildlife Manager Allen Boynton at 276-783-4860.

Applicants for the permit will need to possess a current hunting, trapping or fishing license, as those are the activities allowed on the property. Camping and all-terrain vehicles are prohibited on the Coalfield PALS Area. Regulations for Department-controlled lands will apply to the Coalfield PALS Area.

With hunting season just about to go into full swing, we here at the Department hope that you take advantage of this new program. If you're planning a trip to Southwest Virginia, visit our Web site (www.dgif.virginia.gov) and check out regulations and specific ordinances for the counties in that region along with directions and other information about public lands in the area.

And, if you have land and are interested in participating in this great new program, call me. I'd love to talk with you.

Mission Statement

To manage Virginia's wildlife and inland fish to maintain optimum populations of all species to serve the needs of the Commonwealth; to provide opportunity for all to enjoy wildlife, inland fish, boating and related outdoor recreation; to promote safety for persons and property in connection with boating, hunting and fishing.

Dedicated to the Conservation of Virginia's Wildlife and Natural Resources

Commonwealth of Virginia
Mark R. Warner, Governor

HUNTING & FISHING LICENSE FEES

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NOVEMBER CONTENTS



About the cover:
Raccoons can be identified by a dark mask that covers their face and by their furry ringed tail. These masked bandits will eat just about anything and have adapted to living just about anywhere. Raccoons are found

throughout Virginia and though they may look "warm and fuzzy," be warned, they can be very aggressive and dangerous if cornered. Photo ©Bill Lea



The Gateway to Southwestern Virginia's Great Outdoors by Mark N. McGlade

With over 20,000 acres of water and 500 miles of shoreline it's no wonder why Smith Mountain Lake is considered one of Virginia's best outdoor playgrounds.

Proud To Be A Doe Hunter by Bruce Ingram

Don't let the lack of antlers prevent you from having a successful deer hunting season.

Oh Rats!

by Michael T. Mengak

Is the Allegheny woodrat "packing it up" and leaving Virginia?

Virginia Wildlife Outdoor Catalog *Unique outdoor gifts for this holiday season!*

They Only Come Out At Night by David Hart

"Once I started coon hunting, I never really wanted to do much else."—Lee Amos.

NOVEMBER JOURNAL

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The Gateway to Southwestern Virgin Great Outdoors

by Marc N. McGlade

Spanning Bedford, Franklin and Pittsylvania counties in the gateway to Southwest Virginia is 20,600-acre Smith Mountain Lake. If you drew a straight line on a map between Bedford and Rocky Mount, you would cross the heart of Virginia's second-largest lake, with its 500 miles of stunning shoreline, mountain vistas, spectacular homes, clear water and hungry fish.

This dammed up section of the Roanoke (Staunton) and Blackwater rivers has as its backdrop the majestic Blue Ridge Mountains. The old hills jut skyward providing even more scenery—as if this area didn't

Southwestern Virginia's Smith Mountain Lake is arguably the Commonwealth's most scenic body of water. Opportunities are endless for outdoor enthusiasts!

©Marc N. McGlade

already have enough visual stimulation. The Smith Mountain Lake Chamber of Commerce has an apropos slogan for Smith Mountain Lake: "Where the mountains end and the fun begins."

Smith Mountain Lake (SML) has become a paradise for retirees, most of which hail from the North. The mild climate, cost of living and stellar fishing beckon Yankees to migrate south to Smith Mountain's banks. Most of the shoreline is developed with residential homes, but other facilities catering to outdoor enthusiasts are found at various locations, too.

To say that this lake is one of the Old Dominion's premier fisheries is an understatement. Outstanding angling isn't the only game in town. A vast array of other recreational op-



With hungry fish, stellar scenery and many outdoor options available, it's no wonder why Dale Wilson chose to guide on Smith Mountain Lake more than 30 years ago.

portunities abound, including boating, water skiing, golfing, hiking, camping, backpacking, horseback riding and more.

Smith Mountain Lake is owned by American Electric Power and is managed by the same, primarily for hydroelectric power generation. Smith Mountain Lake is not a newcomer to the Commonwealth: The Smith Mountain Dam—a structure reaching 227 feet high and 816 feet long—was completed in 1963 and the lake reached full pool in March 1966.



©Marc N. McGlade

ia's



There's More Than Striped Bass at SML

Although Leesville Reservoir—located just downstream of SML—lays claim to the current state-record striped bass, it's Smith Mountain Lake that has earned the reputation as Virginia's best striped bass lake. Its notoriety among striped bass anglers is national—and well deserved. Anglers come from many states and far distances to visit this striped bass factory for the opportunity to do battle with a 40-pound fish.

In a lake where fish of this size once ruled the roost—and are certainly at the top of the pecking order—other species get lost in the shuffle. SML has historically been

much ado about stripers, but don't discount the other fish species or you'll be missing out on the phenomenal potential of this scenic lake.

It's also one of the very best crappie waters in Virginia. Most years, SML rivals Buggs Island Lake for the top spot for trophy crappie certificates (crappie measuring 15 inches in length or weighing 2 pounds) and is southwestern Virginia's best bet for crappies.

Biologists recommend anglers key on coves in the upper end of the lake, especially near blowdowns or brush piles.

Together, largemouth and smallmouth bass are the most sought-after species by anglers at SML, according to fisheries biologists with

the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. Largemouths comprise the bulk of this fishery and outnumber smallmouths by a 10-1 ratio. Furthermore, it's consistently one of the top-producing lakes in Virginia for trophy bass (a largemouth weighing 8 pounds or measuring 22 inches in length; a smallmouth pulling down the scales to 5 pounds or stretching the tape to 20 inches).

Fishing for largemouth bass is good at Smith Mountain, but this gem receives significant pressure. Each spring, the Department conducts electrofishing surveys to gather fisheries data. Surveys indicate the largemouth bass and smallmouth bass fishery has declined



says most stripers are caught between the dam and R64 in the Roanoke River leg and up to B40 in the Blackwater River.

"Although these are the general areas most striped bass are caught, these fish are very mobile and may change locations continuously depending on forage availability, water temperature and spawning," he says.

During 2003, Virginia's second-largest lake suffered a major setback to the striped bass fishery.

"A fish kill lasted primarily from late April through early June 2003," Wilson says. "It seemed to hit the bigger fish harder, unfortunately."

The dilemma is that the Department can't point their finger to just one culprit. One thing for certain is that a parasite (parasitic copepod) was discovered. These parasites attach themselves to the inside of stripers' mouths. The second major occurrence was a massive reduction in the threadfin shad population resulting from the winter of 2002-2003. Most of SML's forage base is threadfin shad, gizzard shad and alewife. The forage base was 60 to 70 percent threadfin in 2002. Today, the threadfin population is negligible, Wilson explains—gizzard shad have replaced them once again.

"Looking at the diary data of the Smith Mountain Striper Club, it took them twice as long to catch a stripper over 30 inches during the 2003 calendar year," Wilson says. "Their catch rate of fish over 20 inches stayed the same as previous years, which indi-

Smith Mountain Lake State Park has one of the finest freshwater fishing piers available to anglers in Virginia, along with great camping and hiking facilities.

since the late 1990s, but has stabilized the last couple of years, which is still an improvement over the 1980s and early 1990s.

"The highest densities of largemouth bass in this reservoir are found up lake from the Hales Ford Bridge in the Roanoke River and B26 (red buoy) in the Blackwater River," says Dan Wilson, a fisheries biologist with the Department. "Smallmouth bass are more evenly distributed throughout the reservoir."

A benefit of so many houses dotting the shoreline is that many of the waterfront landowners have docks. The lower reaches of the lake are quite clear, and having shade under a dock is one ingredient bass prefer. Other areas of the lake have blowdowns, rock shoals, points and bluff banks. During the spring, coves usually produce the best largemouth bass angling opportunities. Summertime angling for smallmouths and largemouths is best left to the wee hours of night to avoid heavy boat traffic—plus the bite is far superior when things go bump in the night.

"The stripper fishery has

to be the most notable on Smith Mountain Lake," Wilson says. "Limited spawning habitat for striped bass prevents natural reproduction. Stocking is required to maintain the fishery unlike other species such as bass, crappie, catfish and shad. We increased our stocking rates for striped bass from 300,000 to 450,000 fingerlings (annually) in 1998."

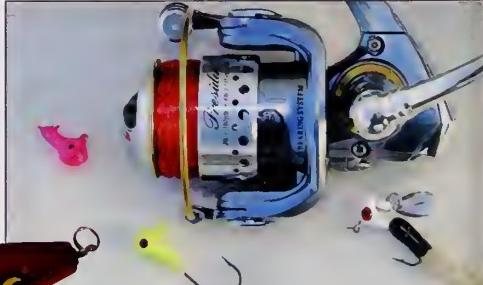
Wilson indicates the stripers are distributed throughout the lake during most of the year, but are concentrated in lower lake areas during the summer and early fall months. Coves are not very productive for stripers during the summer months, he says, so anglers should concentrate on the main lake when the water temperature begins to rise.

"However, the backs of coves, which contain flowing streams, can be productive during the winter and early spring months," Wilson adds. "Look for schools of shad in these areas especially during warming trends when the streams are warmer than the reservoir."

Striper anglers utilize a variety of fishing methods such as drifting live baits, trolling plugs and casting bucktail jigs or topwater lures. Wilson



©Marc N. McGlaide



Small tube jigs work well for crappies, while larger stick and crankbaits will lure smallmouth, largemouth and striped bass.

cated smaller fish were not affected as much from the fish kill.

"This matched our gill net data. That means young fish in the population (3- to 4-year-old fish) are doing well. Our numbers are good for fish out to about 5 years of age. The cut-off appears to be fish in the 10- to 15-plus-pound range. In this range, there is a definite decline in population."

The Smith Mountain Striper Club is a local conservation group that serves Smith Mountain Lake, Leesville Reservoir and the Roanoke River basin. Through their help, along with biologists and other concerned citizens, the hope is that the stripper population will rebound to its heyday form.

Anglers keep legal-size striped bass during the summer months. Furthermore, they encourage striped bass anglers to stop fishing after catching their limit in the months of June through September. Most of the stripers released during the summer months will not survive, according to biologists. A voluntary catch-and-release season is recommended for stripers from October through May to help build population abundance and fish size.

"Sunfish and catfish are also popular species at SML," Wilson says. "Sunfish are abundant, but competition with shad prevents good growth, so most of these fish are small.

"Channel catfish are the most



©Dwight Dyke

When it comes to chasing stripers or big muskie, a pontoon boat is hard to beat. Equipping it with good electronics, that include a depth/fish finder, makes it great for slow trolling or still fishing.

popular catfish species, but flathead catfish have recently been introduced and are gaining popularity because of their large size and abundance. Anglers seeking flatheads should target the upper reaches of the Roanoke section, especially in coves."

SML is also stocked annually with muskie fingerlings. Although the lake doesn't produce large numbers of muskies, a few fish are caught

"The Smith Mountain Striper Club is primarily a conservation and education group, looking after the stripers in the lake," says Rex Smith, the club's president. "Today, most of our catches range in size from 16 to 28 inches, with an occasional bigger one of 37 or 38 inches. Since part of our mission is to educate the public about landlocked stripers, we're obviously concerned about Smith Mountain Lake. The bait is here, and our hope is that the stripers will bounce back. We've been working collaboratively with Department biologists to help maintain the stripper population."

The Department recommends an-

For More Information

- For a free Smith Mountain Lake Newcomer and Visitor Guide, contact the Smith Mountain Lake Chamber of Commerce by phone at (540) 721-1203 or (800) 676-8203. Go to their Web site at www.visit-smithmountainlake.com for a listing of fishing guides, lodges, marinas and other attractions.
- To contact the Smith Mountain Striper Club, call the president, Rex Smith, at (540) 576-3147 or e-mail smithrex@charter.net.
- To learn more about the exciting Smith Mountain Lake fishery, call The Department of Game and Inland Fisheries at (434) 525-7522 or visit online at www.dgif.virginia.gov.
- Numerous public (free-of-charge) and private boat ramps and marinas (for a fee) are found around the lake. In addition, there is a handicapped-accessible fishing pier at the Smith Mountain Lake State Park. Department public boat ramps include Hales Ford, Penhook, Anthony Ford, Scruggs and Hardy Ford.
- For information on Smith Mountain Lake State Park, call (540) 297-6066 or visit online at www.dcr.state.va.us/parks/smithmtn.htm.
- To inquire about lake cruises aboard the Virginia Dare, phone (540) 297-7100 or (800) 721-3273 or visit www.vadarecruises.com.
- For a quality lake map, contact GMCO Maps & Charts by phone at (888) 420-6277, by e-mail at gmco@adelphia.net or visit their Web site at www.gmcomaps.com.
- To check the water level at SML, contact American Electric Power at (540) 985-2767.

each year, primarily by bass and striper anglers. Wilson says VDGIF discontinued stocking walleye, but adult walleyes can be caught along the shoreline of the lower lake (below R8) during the nighttime hours in spring and fall.

"There is a small amount of natural reproduction of walleye occurring in the reservoir," he says.

Boater Alert

It's no wonder people flock to Smith Mountain Lake, with all the amenities it has to offer.

"Smith Mountain Lake is one of the busiest waterways in Virginia—the number of registered boats in the surrounding counties is very high," says Jeff Decker, the boating education coordinator for the Department. "With such heavy boating traffic, boaters need to be very alert and aware of what's going on around them, especially when interacting with other boaters."

Since 1997, Smith Mountain Lake has recorded the highest number of boating accidents of any body of water in Virginia, Decker says. The average number of accidents per year at Smith Mountain is 38.6. Lake Anna averaged 14.1 over the same seven-year period; Chesapeake Bay, 11.1; James River, 9.4; Rappahannock River, 8; Occoquan River, 3.

Decker says there have been nine fatalities at SML since 1997. However, the good news is there have been only two fatalities in the last five years. One fatality, of course, is one too many, but the Department hopes the downward trend continues.

"Overall last year, Virginia's boating accident rate was very low, but this could be partially explained by 12 straight weekends of rainy weather, which reduced the number of boats on the water," Decker explains. "With just under 250,000 registered motor boats in Virginia, it is prudent that boaters take their time, slow down, wear personal flotation devices, take boating safety classes and avoid alcohol. Everyone must work together to make Virginia's waterways as safe as they can be. Boat safe. Boat smart. Wear a life jacket."



©Marc N. McGlade

The Senior Guide's Perspective

Dale Wilson, of Huddleston, Va., is the senior guide on SML as he's been plying these fertile waters as a professional guide for more than 30 years. Wilson, 55, guides visitors year-round to stripers, largemouths, smallmouths and crappies.

When Wilson heads out to the office for a day of work, it entails backing his bass boat down a local boat ramp and blasting off to locate the mother lode of fish.



©Marc N. McGlade

Top: Smith Mountain Lake is well known for its quality striped bass fishing.
Above: No trip to Smith Mountain Lake would be complete without a cruise on the Virginia Dare as it showcases the lake's incredible scenery.

"Since I was born and raised here, I can remember when they were clearing the land and filling the lake," Wilson says.

Although he witnessed the construction of this fish tank, most of what Wilson has learned about SML is on-the-water experience that an angler can learn only by paying his or her dues.

"Season in and season out, you can catch smallmouth, largemouth, striper and crappie—among other species—at SML," the affable guide says. "You can fish all year here and can find any type of species. You can catch a mixed bag of species that adds to the enjoyment, although it's a tough lake to fish; you just have to learn the ins and outs."

Because of the heavy boating traffic (from late spring through early fall), water temperature and water clarity, night fishing has become popular. Additionally, alewives and other baitfish move shallow at night to which the predators have become so grateful.

Some of Wilson's biggest fish are impressive, but that's not surprising considering his experience level and that he casts his line in one of the Commonwealth's best lakes. He has landed largemouths as big as 10 pounds, 14 ounces, a 30-pound muskie, an 8-pound walleye, stripers weighing just under 40 pounds, a 3-pound, 12-ounce white bass, a 6-plus-pound smallmouth and a crappie just over 3 pounds. It doesn't take Dick Tracy to realize SML is loaded with sizeable fish!

The next time you see a tow vehicle loaded with fishing supplies and hauling a boat heading in the direction of Smith Mountain Lake, you should experience a heavy dose of envy. If you look closely, you'll now see cars, trucks and SUVs displaying a sticker that reads, "SML." Read it and weep. □

Marc McGlade is a writer and photographer from Midlothian. Marc is a regular contributor to Virginia Wildlife, Game & Fish, FLW Outdoors, North Carolina Sportsman, The Sportsman's Magazine and other national and regional publications.



©Dwight Dyke. Inset ©Bruce Ingram

PROUD TO BE A DOE HUNTER

by Bruce Ingram

My wife, our two children and I live in Botetourt County on 29 acres. A family tradition for me is to go deer hunting behind the house on Thanksgiving morning. My wife Elaine's only hard and fast rule concerning my hunting on that Thursday is that I be back at the house by noon so that we can all gather around our traditional meal of turkey, venison, sweet potatoes, pumpkin pie and other fare.

I almost bore the brunt of my spouse's ire last Thanksgiving. You see, I had killed three deer earlier in the season and badly wanted one last doe to replenish our freezer with venison for the coming year. Our 21-year-old daughter Sarah relishes experimenting with venison dishes, and our 18-year-old son Mark just

Hunters across Virginia are cashing in on Virginia's excellent doe hunting.

loves consuming anything and everything in huge quantities. I am a health food enthusiast, and no other red meat, I feel, is better to eat in terms of being high protein and low in calories and fat than venison. And as a wife and mother, Elaine well understands the importance of nourishing food such as venison in a healthy diet.

Above: The author with a Botetourt County doe that he killed after school during the regular gun season. Not only did the hunt prove to be challenging, but it also offered his family some very nutritional food for the rest of the year.



©Bill Lea

So although I had told Elaine I would be back by noon, I was determined to stay in the woods until I had tagged that fourth deer of the season. At 8:30 a.m., eight does paraded by my position, but even though all of them were only about 25 yards distant, none of them presented a satisfactory target with my 12 gauge, which was fueled with buckshot. Trees obstructed possible shots at three of the deer, two does were so close together that I was afraid I would hit both of them, and the last three does that scuttled past me were moving too fast to offer shots.

Over the next two-plus hours, I sat and stewed over my bad luck as I



occasionally glimpsed at my wristwatch. At 10:40 while I was munching on an apple, a doe came running to my position, stopped for a long second or two—giving me just enough time to let the apple fall from my mouth and the shotgun to be raised to my shoulder. A few minutes later, I was tagging and field dressing the doe, a half hour later I was on the way with the whitetail to my butcher's, and at noon, I was regaling family members about my

morning adventure. I even had the gall to tell Elaine that, of course, I would have been back by noon even if my hunt had been unsuccessful.

Look, I enjoy interviewing Virginia hunters who are experts at killing trophy deer and then sharing that knowledge through magazine articles with fellow sportsmen. But as for myself, I am basically a doe hunter and proud to be one. Dave Steffen, forest wildlife program manager for the Virginia Depart-

Above: Notice anything different about the understory in these pictures? Most of it is gone. Deer, especially does, are eating machines and can quickly strip the understory, which has a negative impact on other animals. Photos ©Bill Lea

ment of Game and Inland Fisheries, maintains that harvesting does is often a positive for the Commonwealth's deer herd.

"In general, we try to encourage people to harvest does and to con-

vince people to overcome the notion that real hunters don't shoot does," says Steffen. "The Department is also looking at ways to liberalize the harvest in many counties. In some places, Fauquier, Loudoun, and Bedford counties are just three examples, despite those liberal harvests, we are still not meeting harvest objectives to stabilize the herd.

"Hunters are really the deer managers. They are the Department's main management tool. When an individual makes the decision to kill a doe or not, he or she is making both a personal and a management decision.

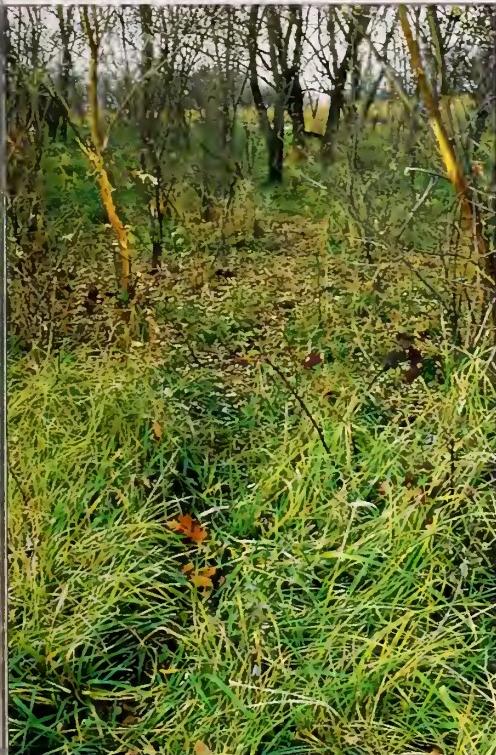
"Deer can have an ecological impact on the ecosystem. We know that



Deer droppings (above), trails through the woods and fields (lower left), and food sources like oak acorns (below) are good indications that deer are frequent visitors to the area. Photos ©Bill Lea

and soft mast food sources, and stand sites.

Being primarily a doe hunter, I am not much interested in locating rubs, scrapes, or lightly traveled trails, which are often the passageways of bucks. Places that show consistent and heavy deer usage are what attract me. I try to visit a dozen or so farms in Botetourt, Craig and Franklin counties and occasionally places in Bedford and Roanoke counties. I also scout parcels in the George Washington and Jefferson National Forest. Three days before the season opener, I analyze all of the information I have gathered and rate all places scouted by their potential to produce a doe on opening day.



overly abundant deer herds impact the forest understory. Because of that fact, some forest bird species — ovenbirds are a good example — have been impacted by overly abundant deer herds."

For me, the quest to kill four deer for the freezer begins with Virginia's bow season the first Saturday in October. Actually, that mission begins three to four weeks before the opener when I begin scouting. Specifically, I look for well-traveled trails, hard

Dave Steffen adds that dedicated doe hunters may want to take advantage of hunting opportunities outside of the traditional seasons. Antlerless deer can be taken during Virginia's special urban archery seasons in 16 cities and towns across the state. The second half of this year's urban archery season runs from January 3 to March 26 where open.

The top six places in that ranking are where I try to hunt the first week of the season. I have no loyalty to places that have produced deer for me in the past, only those that show plenty of deer sign in the present.

When the early muzzleloader season begins East of the Blue Ridge, I develop a two-prong plan—again with does as my primary focus. The eastern early muzzleloader season begins after daylight saving time ends, thus hunters have an extra hour of sunlight in the mornings to hunt. I am a high school English/Yearbook teacher in Botetourt County, and the school where I teach is only 7½ miles from where I live. Teachers don't have to report until 8:45, so many mornings during the eastern early muzzleloader season, I bowhunt (so that I can possibly kill a doe) before school in Botetourt County for 90 minutes or so. By this time, the pre rut is in full force and both doe and buck activity has noticeably increased.

School lets out at 3:45, and at that time, I make a mad dash for Bedford or Franklin County where I participate in the early muzzleloader season. Both Bedford and Franklin, as is typical with many East of the Blue Ridge counties, offer either-sex hunting throughout the early muzzleloader season. And I don't mind "crossing the ridge" in order to have a chance to tag a doe.

When the one-week early muzzleloader season begins West of the Blue Ridge, I slightly modify my game plan. In the West in most counties, the only doe day is on the Monday of the weeklong early muzzleloader season. This day looms huge in my "fill the freezer strategy," as I strive to hunt on the Botetourt County farm where I have seen the most deer traffic during the October bow season.

For example, last year in much of western Virginia, the hard mast crop failed or was spotty. But on one Botetourt County farm where I have permission to go afield, the northern red, scarlet and black oaks had engendered acorns in amazing profusion. On a mid September scouting

foray, I learned of that mast situation, and, not surprisingly, I killed an antlerless deer on that farm the first week of the archery season.

That farm continued to feature high deer numbers the rest of the month, and I even had a chance to arrow a doe there in late October. But I came down with a bad case of "doe fever," (the whitetail was a mature, full-sized one) and an attack of

way to a mountain laurel bedding ground. Not long after sunrise, I espied a doe foraging through the oak grove. Just before 7:00 a.m., the whitetail had moved to within some 30 yards of my position and it was then that I touched off the smoke-pole. I had plenty of time to tag, field dress, check in and deliver the doe to my butcher's before school.

This anecdote leads to two relevant points for readers who want to become dedicated doe hunters. First, as I noted earlier, I don't believe deer hunters should be loyal to places that produced deer in the past. That particular farm where I killed two deer last autumn had not produced a deer for me since 1996 and had seen little deer traffic in recent years, but that parcel was far and away the best place I hunted in 2003. My long



©Bruce Ingram



©Bruce Ingram

nerves resulted in an arrow flying harmlessly over the animal's shoulder.

That Botetourt farm was the obvious choice for a before school hunt on the doe day of early muzzleloader season. Well before dawn, I positioned myself at the foot of a mountain. My exact location was where the aforementioned oak grove bordered the mountainside that the deer traveled up on their

By studying the various game seasons and regulations, hunters can pursue antlerless whitetails throughout Virginia during the season. This Botetourt County sportswoman inspects an area for deer signs during the doe days West of the Blue Ridge during the late muzzleloader season.

time favorite farm to hunt deer on produced no whitetails last autumn, and I had abandoned it by late October.

Second, fellow hunters often tease me about my bothering to go afield for just 90 minutes or so before school and driving 45 minutes to Bedford or Franklin for a 45-minute "doe hunt" after school. Since 1992, I have killed 10 whitetails before school and 11 after school during these mini-hunts. If you strive to be a successful doe hunter, you have to spend every minute you can in the woods.

Once the regular gun season begins, I usually have a very good idea which places have the most potential to produce antlerless deer. Although I enjoy hunting in the national forest, I never venture there during the regular gun season until doe days commence. When the late muzzleloader season begins in mid December, once again I travel to East of the Blue

I chased after last year was a mature doe that I estimated to be between 3½ and 4½ years old. I first saw her in early October (she was very large and did not have fawns) when I was bowhunting from a portable behind my house. As I drew back, she detected movement, snorted, and fled.

The next time she approached that stand, she stopped short some 30 yards away, looked up at me and

scent control, and entering hunting areas—indeed, the same steps that many trophy buck hunters follow. If you decide to become a dedicated doe hunter, you can be assured that you are doing your part to help manage Virginia's deer herd, prevent deer from damaging wildlife habitat in many areas of the state and providing nourishing food for your family. □



©Bruce Ingram

Above: The author prepares to check and record a nice doe that he killed during the early muzzleloader season.

once again snorted and departed. A week later I decided to hunt the doe again, but this time I positioned the stand six feet higher in the tree. On that hunt, I saw the whitetail once more stop short of the stand, take a whiff of the air, stare up at me, and, predictably, flee.

Two weeks after the regular gun season ended, I witnessed "my" doe feeding on the remains of Elaine's flower garden in our front yard. (Overabundant deer populations can not only impact flower gardens, but also orchards and ornamentals as well as cause traffic accidents.) And just before doe days began during the late muzzleloader season West of the Blue Ridge, I spotted the doe foraging on honeysuckle near my driveway. I had gone to put a letter in the mailbox, and even though I was just 15 yards from where the doe was feeding, she deemed my presence non-threatening. During the late muzzleloader season, I finally gave up on trying to kill that doe; she was simply too wary for someone of my skills to successfully hunt.

Summing Up

As a doe hunter, I abide by a strict regimen of scouting, clothes storage,

©Bruce Ingram



Ridge domains where does are legal and only go afield West of the Blue Ridge until the last week of the season—again when doe days begin in certain counties.

Respect Does

I am always amazed when some individuals make comments about does not being challenging to pursue or that they killed "only a doe." Indeed, the most challenging whitetail

Bruce Ingram is a well-known outdoor writer and photographer whose articles have appeared in magazines like Bassmaster, Sports Afield, and Outdoor Life. He has also recently written a new book entitled *The James River Guide, Fishing and Floating on Virginia's Finest*.

Elaine Ingram's Favorite Venison Recipes

Venison Marinade

3 tablespoons steak sauce
2 tablespoons cooking sherry
2 tablespoons soy sauce
2 tablespoons brown sugar
2-3 shakes garlic powder
2-3 shakes powdered ginger

Combine all ingredients in a bowl or Zip-loc bag. Add 1-1½ pounds thawed venison steak or tenderloin. Marinate in the refrigerator for at least ½ hour, or as long as 8 hours. Grill until done.

Venison Hamburger

For each pound of venison burger, work in 2 tablespoons steak sauce and 2 tablespoons mustard. Sprinkle 2-3 shakes of garlic powder. Grill as usual. (Barbeque sauce can be substituted for the steak sauce with equally good results.)



©Bruce Ingram



Oh Rats!

*The Allegheny woodrat,
better known as
the notorious
“Pack Rat,” is
disappearing at an
alarming rate through-
out the Northeast and
wildlife biologists want
to know why.*

by Dr. Michael T. Mengak

High on a ridge and deep in the Blue Ridge Mountains lives one of the Commonwealth's lesser-known mammals. This creature is seen by few but held

in high esteem by those who know him. He is an unassuming beast, a true creature of the night. The Allegheny woodrat inhabits more remote areas throughout Virginia. His favorite habitats include caves, rocky outcrops, talus slopes, cliffs, boulder fields and—occasionally—the isolated woodsman's cabin. The woodrat is known by several names including cave rat, pack rat and trade rat.

The Allegheny woodrat is a candidate for an identity crisis if ever there was one. In the early 1900s this medium-sized mammal was named *Neotoma magister* and considered by early mammalogists to be a separate species of rodent. In the 1940s, its name was changed to *Neotoma floridana magister*—only a subspecies of the widespread eastern woodrat. Now, thanks to DNA research and

advanced statistical methods, the Allegheny woodrat is again considered a separate species (*Neotoma magister*) from its more widespread cousin.

The eastern woodrat ranges from Key Largo, Florida, north to western North Carolina and west to Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas. It occupies a wide variety of habitats including streamside shrub communities of the Midwest, beach dunes in Florida and southern piney woods throughout the southern Piedmont. Our Allegheny woodrat, however, prefers much more exclusive habitat. The Allegheny woodrat makes its home among rocky outcrops and caves. Most any rocky area with rocks large enough to form passageways big enough for a rat to run through is potential habitat.

This mammal is also a candidate

for something more ominous—listing among the members of the exclusive Endangered Species List. Currently the legal status of the woodrat is “species of special concern,” although this carries no official protection. Wildlife biologists are concerned because the Allegheny woodrat has disappeared from New York and Connecticut, and previously known colonies have disappeared from many northern states. Their status in Virginia was unknown 11 years ago when I began my study.

My research has as its twin goals to determine the distribution of the woodrat in Virginia and to assess the status of some of these colonies. Along the way we have learned a great deal about the biology and natural history of the woodrat. This research has been funded by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries’ Nongame Program, George Washington and Jefferson National Forests, Shenandoah National Park, Virginia Academy of Sciences, Westvaco Corporation and Georgia-Pacific Corporation. I have compiled a map showing the distribution of the Allegheny woodrat in Virginia (below) and have documented woodrats in 24 of 31 counties within their range. This is seven counties more than were recorded by Handley and Patten in 1947 in their book *Mammals of Virginia*. I have found them in counties not previously known to have woodrats and have noted their disappearance from formerly occupied counties. They seem to have disappeared from several northern counties including Fairfax, Loudoun, Clarke and Frederick. Of nine known woodrat sites in Shenandoah National Park in 1992, only seven had woodrats in our 1994 survey.

The woodrat is a handsome animal. Gray and silver above, creamy white on the un-

derside, their large eyes and ears are not rat like to the mind of many observers. Both help the woodrat survive in their often underground world. Their facial whiskers can be over three inches long and help “Woody” feel his way in the complete darkness of a cave. Their moderately furry tail is nearly as long as their body and aids in balance as they gracefully jump from rock to rock. They are excellent climbers—I have observed them climb nearly vertical rock walls in a cave. They are strongly nocturnal and generally venture out only to find food and mates.

The woodrat has a body length of 8 to 10 inches and weighs about 11 to 13 ounces, but large males can tip the scales at over a pound. Woodrats are clean but not social animals. They characteristically deposit fecal material in piles called latrines. The sign can persist for many years in a cave or under a protected rock overhang. They gather many kinds of vegetation including twigs, leaves, mushrooms, ferns and acorns into a food cache called a midden. Their actual nests are volleyball-sized clumps of shredded bark with a hollow area opening to one side. Nests are generally located deep in a cave or crevice. Middens are more visible since they are often placed on a ledge or under an overhanging rock.

Since many types of vegetation will do for a meal, individual



Dr. M.T. Mengak



woodrats do not travel widely in search of food. In the Ridge and Valley Region of Virginia and West Virginia, other researchers learned that woodrats consume all or parts of 31 species including fungi, lichens, ferns, moss and many plants. Plant parts eaten include leaves, seed or fruit, twigs and buds. Acorns, grapes, dogwood fruits, mushrooms and even Jack-in-the-pulpit are consumed.

Researchers are learning more of their movements through the use of radio telemetry studies. Research suggests that woodrats spend their entire adult lives within an area no larger than 12 acres. In the winter, this may be reduced to one to two acres. Little is known about the dispersal of young animals, but one adult woodrat in New York was located nearly 2 miles from its original capture site.

The main reason for studying woodrats is their generally rapid and complete decline in other states of their range. Woodrats have disappeared entirely from New York and Connecticut. New Jersey has only

Below: Over an 11 year period and using live traps, Dr. Mengak determined that the distribution of the Allegheny woodrat was mainly 24 counties along the remote mountain ranges of western Virginia.

one active colony; Pennsylvania has only three colonies in the eastern part of the state but several in the western counties. Ohio, Indiana, and Maryland have also documented declining populations. Populations in West Virginia and Virginia seem stable but there is a general declining trend in Virginia (Monitoring Results, page 17). As conservationists, this should trouble all of us, as this may be another sign of unwanted human impact on nature. If humans are somehow responsible for the decline of the woodrat—an animal of remote areas—what else are our activities impacting?

No one knows for certain why woodrats are declining. Suggestions include less acorn mast due to gypsy moth defoliation of oaks, habitat fragmentation from human activities such as forestry practices and urbanization, increased abundance of raccoons and a peculiar raccoon parasite that is fatal to woodrats and other mammals including humans when ingested. Because of their habit of collecting things from their environment, some researchers have suggested that woodrats collect raccoon feces and ingest the eggs of this parasite, which is fatal once in the woodrats system.

To assess the distribution of woodrats in Virginia, I set live traps in areas that are known or suspected to have woodrats. Generally 10 to 15 traps are set for two nights. Traps are baited with an apple, and if any woodrats are caught, the sight is considered occupied and will not be assessed again for two or three years.

A second method is used to assess trends in selected populations. Here, 40 traps, baited with apples, are set for two nights. All captured animals are weighed, sexed, and examined for overall health and condition. Reproductive status is determined, and each animal is given a uniquely numbered ear tag for future identification. They are carefully handled with gloves and handling bags. They are not anesthetized. Woodrats are not aggressive but can give a painful bite if mishandled. Animals are then released at the capture site. The entire han-

dling time is about five minutes. These trap sites are called monitoring sites. They were trapped every year in the fall and occasionally in the spring. Trapping all these sites is a big job. I have been fortunate to receive excellent support and field assistance from personnel of the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries and the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests. Many students in the Environmental Science Program at Ferrum College have also assisted with the fieldwork.

As seen in the monitoring chart, the results of trapping can fluctuate a great deal between years. The cause or causes of this fluctuation are unknown but could be related to weather, acorn crop, subtle habitat

changes or other factors. Trapping occurs as close as possible to the same time each year and traps are placed in approximately the same locations each year. To illustrate the rapidity at which the population can change at a site, consider the monitoring site in Giles County. In 1997, I trapped this site bi-monthly from April to October. I marked a total of 32 woodrats at the site during this time. During the October monitoring session, I caught 17 individual woodrats. The following April zero woodrats were caught at this site. Again in May and July zero woodrats were caught. Finally, in October 1998 a single untagged male was caught. Where did all the other animals go? Additional trapping in 1999 and 2000 failed to turn

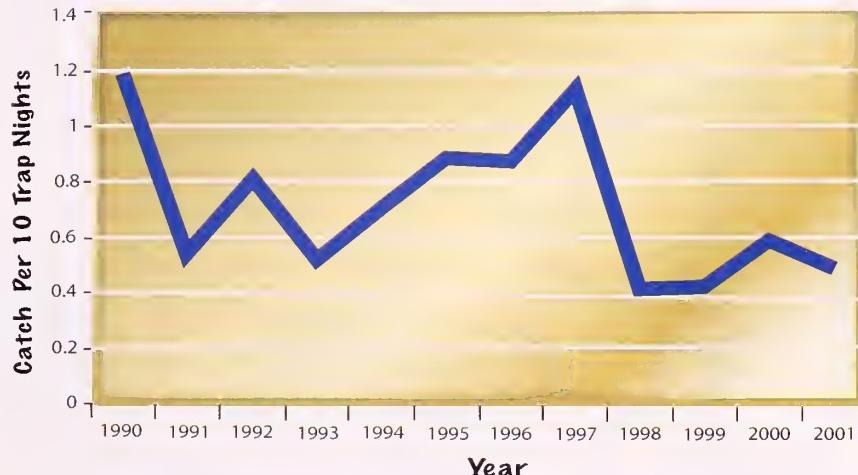


up any of the original animals that were known to occupy the site in 1997. They simply disappeared.

To learn even more about the biology and natural history of the woodrat in Virginia, two sites were trapped bi-monthly from 1998 to 2000. Woodrats were often caught repeatedly, giving me valuable data on reproduction, growth, longevity and movements.

Our current knowledge of woodrats is similar to pieces of a puzzle, but we do not know what the whole picture looks like, and we do not know how all the pieces fit together or even if some pieces are necessary to complete the puzzle. For instance, the second woodrat I ever trapped was an adult female living in a cave in Bath County. She

Woodrat Monitoring Results



Up until the early 1990s little was known about the Allegheny woodrat in Virginia. Dr. Mengak has shown that in Virginia the population of the Allegheny woodrat has remained somewhat stable. Below: Its preferred habitat includes: large rocks along mountainsides, caves and outcrops. The woodrat is best known for its habit of collecting and storing unusual items; thus the nickname "pack rat."

was caught only once in June 1990 and not caught again in any subsequent trapping at this site. Then in May 1992, at the same burrow she was caught again—a spread of 720 days. Where did she go? At her second capture, she had two young with her.

Indeed, a similar event occurred later in Franklin County. I caught an adult female (#209) in an abandoned car in March and April 1992. She was not caught after April. Then in September 1992 a different adult female (#260) was caught at this site in the car. Number 260 was fitted with a radio transmitter in January 1993 and traced until her death from predation in February 1993. Within 10 days of the death of number 260, number 209 was back at the same abandoned car where she was originally caught. Where did she go in the interval between April 1992 and February 1993? Again, our understanding of these animals is incomplete. Laboratory studies suggest that woodrats are antisocial to members of their own species except for one or two days when they mate.

Woodrats in Virginia seem to be capable of breeding at any time during the year. I have observed small but furred and active young nursing in February. I have caught young woodrats in all months except November and December, but I don't get to trap much in these months. They have two or three young per





litter and any individual female probably has no more than 2 litters per year. Woodrats are born blind and naked but grow rapidly. Weaning occurs at about 21 days and the young are probably independent at 50 days. Spring-born females can breed their first year. The animals have a slow reproductive rate for a rodent, being more similar to a gray squirrel or gopher than to a mouse or European rat. They typically live less than one year in the wild, but individuals can live longer. I

have followed more than two dozen that lived over two years. Prior to 1997, the record for longevity was a male who lived 45 months in the wild and a female who survived for 49 months. However, with additional study that record now stands at 55½ months in the wild. This illustrates the urgent need to conduct long-term research on native wildlife in a natural setting in order to fully learn the biology and natural history of each species.

There is still much to learn about these intriguing mammals. It is unfortunate that they bear the name "rat" because they have only a superficial resemblance to the Old World creature. Perhaps folks would be more attracted to this animal if it were called "rock squirrel" or "boulder bunny." Either way, we have a responsibility to learn more about the biology of the Allegheny woodrat and the status of this species in Virginia. If we find it is declining, we must take appropriate measures to reverse that trend. Unfortunately, we simply do not know enough to be able to say we can "manage" this animal. More work is needed with this animal, but it is my hope that the woodrat will not join others on the Endangered Species List. □

Dr. Michael Mengak, formerly Professor of Forestry and Wildlife at Ferrum College, Ferrum, Virginia, is now a Wildlife Extension Specialist at the Warnell School of Forest Resources, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia.

VIRGINIA WILDLIFE OUTDOOR CATALOG



Our two most recent additions to Virginia Wildlife collectables

Bear with Fish

Our bear has caught his fish and is not about to let it get away. This collectable bear is approximately 12 inches high.

Item # VW-518 \$9.95 each

Duck with Baby

This baby duck is hitching a ride on its mother. This colorful collectable duck and baby is available in limited quantities.

Item # VW-519 \$9.95 each





NEW for 2004

Limited Edition Collector's Plates

Our first in a series of *Virginia Wildlife* limited edition collector's plates. This collectable is titled "Winter Comfort" and is taken from an original artwork by Bob Henley. Each plate is individually serial numbered and has the year of issue identified on the back.

Price \$22.95 Item # VW-500

Limited Edition Steins

Our first in a series of *Virginia Wildlife* limited edition steins. This companion piece to our collector's plate shown above is also individually serial numbered and has the year of issue identified on the reverse side.

Price \$16.95 Item # VW-501

Our Virginia Wildlife Collection of Throws and Pillows



Yellow Lab Pups Tapestry Throw

Created from a photograph by Virginia photographer Dwight Dyke, these five Lab pups lay about in the warmth of their basket alongside tools of their trade. This tapestry throw, created exclusively for VDGIF, is triple jacquard woven of 100% cotton. Machine washable and measures approximately 52" x 69" — \$39.95 Item # VW-515
Matching Pillow — \$19.95 Item # VW-516



Fall Buck Throw

Triple jacquard woven of 100% cotton, 52" x 69," Machine Washable — \$39.95 # VW-511
Matching Pillow — \$19.95 Item # VW-512



Winter Songbirds Throw

Triple jacquard woven of 100% cotton, 52" x 69," Machine Washable — \$39.95 Item # VW-507
Matching Pillow — \$19.95 Item # VW-508



Down From the North Throw

Triple jacquard woven of 100% cotton, 52" x 69," Machine Washable
\$39.95 Item # VW-509



Matching Pillow — \$19.95 Item # VW-510

For the Art Lover or Collector

Framed 16" x 20" prints of our
"Winter in Virginia" original paintings.



Virginia Wildlife Greeting Cards and Prints

Renowned wildlife artist Spike Knuth has captured the unique lives of Virginia's wildlife. A cardinal, grouse, wild turkey and white-tailed deer are featured in this first set of greeting cards. Each box contains 12 cards and envelopes; three cards per image for only — \$9.95 Item # VW-212

Also for the art lover are framable, 11" X 14" prints of each of the "Winter in Virginia" original paintings. The set of four prints is available for — \$19.95. Item# VW-56

Each print is custom framed and matted. These attractive prints will brighten any room and are available for a limited time at — \$35.95 each. Item # VW-211
please indicate: Cardinal, Turkey, Deer or Grouse



2004 Limited Edition Virginia Wildlife Collector's Knife

This year's knife has been custom made for us by Buck Knives. Every facet of this knife indicates that it will be a treasured collectable. From its distinctive handle with gold lettering and brass bolsters to the knife blade engraved with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries logo, each knife is individually serial numbered and comes in a decorative, custom wood box. Limited quantities of 400.

Item # VW-403 \$85.00 each



Collector's Patches 2003

The first set in a series to be issued each year. Our 2003 edition has been custom designed exclusively for VDGIF. One patch displays a deer in a woodland setting, the other a black bear mother and cub. This first edition is sure to become a valued collectable.

\$9.95 set of two patches Item # VW-505



Collector's Patches 2004

The second issue in our collectors patch series. One patch displays a duck in flight against a sky blue background, the other a trout for the angler in all of us.

\$9.95 for a set of two patches Item #VW-506



Buckles

Our bass and duck belt buckle collection is crafted of solid pewter with *Virginia Wildlife* engraved at the bottom. Each buckle comes in a custom gift box with the VDGIF distinctive logo displayed.

\$9.95 each Item # VW-502 Bass VW-503 Duck

NEW for 2004

Our *Virginia Wildlife* collection of

Pulsar Watches by Seiko

Your choice \$59.00 each or 2 for \$100.00



From the Ladies Pulsar collection. This attractive watch has a gold tone bracelet with gold tone hands and markers on a champagne dial. Water Resistant.

Item # W-302



From the Pulsar Nightfall line. TiCN Plating, gold tone crown, hands and markers and black dial. Water Resistant.

Item # VW-301



Mans Wrist Watch, stainless steel bracelet, luminous hands and markers blue sunburst dial. One way rotating elapsed timing bezel. Water Resistant.

Item # VW-300



Book Clock

This decorative book style clock is crafted of solid cherry wood, beautifully engraved with a vivid wildlife scene on the book side of the clock. The clock face is of old world décor, a collectors delight. Clock is 5 1/2" x 8 1/2" when opened..

\$29.95 Item # VW-303



Pocket Knife

This attractive and functional 3-inch folding knife, manufactured by Bear Cutlery, comes with *Virginia Wildlife* etched on the oak handle. Each knife is gift boxed. \$24.95 Item # VW-400

Commemorative Collector's Coin

Each coin is engraved with the original artwork of a black bear and cub, provided by wildlife artist Spike Knuth, and is packaged in an attractive gift box. *Limited quantity available.*

\$9.95 Item # VW-504





Virginia Wildlife T-Shirts

T-Shirt with eagle, available in Black, Navy and Teal \$12.95 each
Item # VW-100



VW-104

VW-103

Each shirt is 100% cotton and embroidered with the *Virginia Wildlife* logo, and a largemouth bass or white-tailed deer. Please specify size, M, L, XL, XXL and color, Grey, Navy, Tan, Teal, or Black when ordering. — \$12.95 each
Largemouth Bass – Item # VW-103 White-tailed Deer – Item # VW-104



VW-109

VW-110

VW-111

NEW Denim Shirts

100% cotton, pre-washed, long sleeve denim shirts with embroidered logo, available in sizes Med, Large, X Large and XX Large. — \$19.95 each

Denim Shirt with Cardinal Item # VW-109

Denim Shirt with Eagle Item # VW-110

Denim Shirt with Trout Item # VW-111

VW-106

VW-107



VW-108

VW-105

NEW Virginia Wildlife Sweatshirts

These attractive shirts are a 50/50 cotton polyester blend, with an embroidered logo, and are available in sizes, Med, Large, X Large and XX Large. — \$17.95 each

Sweat shirt with Eagle comes in colors Black, Navy and Khaki – Item# VW-105

Sweat shirt with Trout comes in colors Grey, Navy and Khaki – Item # VW-106

Sweat shirt with Deer comes in colors Black, Grey and Khaki – Item # VW-107

Sweat shirt with Cardinal comes in colors Black, Navy and Rose – Item # VW-108

VW-113

VW-114

VW-112

VW-120

VW-118

VW-116



- High profile - Deer - Item # VW-118
- Low profile - Deer - Item # VW-117
- High profile - Bass - Item # VW-116
- Low profile - Bass - Item # VW-115



Virginia Wildlife Caps

Hats off to the new *Virginia Wildlife* caps that feature three unique designs. Each cap is 100% cotton, size adjustable and embroidered with the *Virginia Wildlife* magazine logo. — \$11.95 each

- High profile - Camo With Black Letters - Item # VW-113
- High profile - Blaze Orange - Item # VW-114
- High profile - Camo With Tan Letters - Item # VW-112
- High profile - Virginia Wildlife - Item # VW-120
- Low profile - Virginia Wildlife - Item # VW-119



VW-121



VW-122



VW-123



VW-124

NEW Virginia Wildlife Caps

Our new *Virginia Wildlife* hats are available in 100% cotton or in denim and are size adjustable. These attractive hats have been embroidered with our *Virginia Wildlife* magazine logo and feature either an eagle or trout for the wildlife and fishing enthusiasts. Hats are available in high profile. Check out our new low profile denim hats. These hats look great with our new denim shirts. — \$11.95 each

- Navy Hat with Trout Item # VW-121
- Black Hat with Eagle Item # VW-122
- Denim Hat with Eagle Item # VW-123
- Denim Hat with Trout Item # VW-124

Item #	Name of Item	Qty.	Size	Color	Price	Total Price

Make checks payable to *Treasure of Virginia* and mail to: Virginia Wildlife Catalog
P.O. Box 11104, Richmond, VA 23230-1104
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They Only Come Out At Night

by David Hart



© Tamara Marie

Local hunters help to keep the light shining bright on the age-old sport of coon hunting.

Lee Amos glances down at the white leather tennis shoes on my feet as I step out of my truck.

"Good thing we ain't hunting a swamp tonight. You'd be awfully miserable. You bring a light?"

Two other hunters, both wearing a hard hat with a small spotlight over the brim and battery pack the size of a brick on their belt, steal a glance at my shoes as they load dogs into a kennel in the bed of a pickup. No problem, I say, boots are in the truck and yes, I brought a flashlight.



©Bill Lea

Raccoons are found throughout Virginia and are mainly active at night. Males can average 10 to 25 pounds and are about 28 inches in length. They are excellent climbers and one of the few mammals that can descend vertically down a tree trunk headfirst.

Amos, a dairy farmer from Cumberland County, Virginia, pulls off a cotton glove, thrusts his hand forward and smiles a mouth full of teeth, yellow, no doubt, from a lifetime of chewing tobacco. A sock the size of a roll of dimes bulges his cheek; it shows as he smiles. His hand is as hard and

rough as you'd expect a farmer's to be, but there's a gleam in his eye that offers an unquestionable welcome. That's the way coon hunters are. Maybe they're always willing to bring along a stranger because coon hunting is a cold, dark, lonely sport. More likely, they just like sharing the excitement of a good hunt with whoever is willing to come along.

The four of us pull out of Amos' driveway and turn left onto the blacktop. We make small talk as we drive through the cold night. Joe Boggs is a traveling salesman for a coal mine supply company and lives in the rugged mountains of Southwest Virginia. His work takes him to coal fields throughout the country, even Mexico and Canada, but when he's home and it's dark, Boggs is likely chasing coons up and down the slopes of the Appalachians. His son, Joseph, is a forestry student at Virginia Tech and, like his father, hunts whenever he can. Coon hunters are a dedicated group, so dedicated many don't mess with deer, small game or any other type of hunting.

"I used to deer hunt, but it never really interested me that much. Too many people in the woods," shrugs Amos. "Working a dairy farm doesn't give me too much free time during the day anyway. Once I started coon hunting, I never really wanted to do much else."

We turn past a solitary house and a woman peers out the window as we skirt the yard, then cut down a dirt path through some scrub pines. Boggs stops his truck on the dam of a pond ringed with ice and we bail out into the cold night. Before he turns the dogs loose, Amos affixes tracking collars to each hound. Time was, a dog could go wherever the coon took it and Amos didn't have to worry about whose land he crossed, where his dogs ended up, and whether or not he had spoken permission from the landowner. Thirty years ago, when the 54-year old hunter got started in coon hunting, he could go wherever he wanted without a single care. Posted signs were unheard of. But farms got sold



©David Hart



©David Hart

Contrary to what critics believe, technology in the form of radio tracking collars hasn't made hunting for raccoons easier. Tracking collars help to prevent injuries to the dogs and allows the hunters to find their dogs quicker.

and split and split again and much of the countryside consists of small lots and homeowners who neither know

the first thing about hunting, nor care. But despite the endless subdividing, central Virginia is still a patchwork of vast stands of second-growth timber or replanted pines, most with a creek or two weaving through them, and finding a place to turn the dogs loose is still as easy as making a few phone calls.

"It's harder than it was when I first started. I may have to drive a little farther or make a few more phone calls to set up a hunt, but I still got plenty of places to go," says Amos.

I haven't even finished pulling on my gloves and straightening out my hat when the dogs strike the first scent of the night, not a hundred yards from the base of the pond dam. The deep, loud bawl of Ring and Latch, the two veteran hounds, rolls through the still night and disappears somewhere across an empty pasture. I wonder if anyone else hears the music of the coonhounds. Boggs explains that a good coon dog won't make a sound until it catches a whiff of raccoon and these two are as good as can be. We're in business.

"They're on a hot trail," says Amos. "Hear how excited they sound?"

I nod, but only to be agreeable. Like a father who can decipher his child's voice in a cafeteria full of school kids, however, Amos knows exactly what his dogs are saying. I can only guess. The long, bellowing yowls change to a hoarse, excited bark. Something's different.



"There he is. Ring's got 'em treed."

Amos explains that a good coon dog will change not only the tone of its bark when it actually runs a raccoon up a tree, but the tempo, as well. Ring's drawn-out bawl has indeed changed to an excited, high-pitched chop and even I can tell that the hunt has just taken a turn.

The three hunters flick on their headlamps and shuffle down the steep pond dam to the edge of the creek. I hold an arm up to block whipping branches from slapping me in the face. We weave our way through the thick growth along the edge of a sandy creek bed and come up to Ring and Latch who bounce up and down at the base of a tall poplar. If dogs could climb, these two would

certainly be in the midst of a nasty fight 80 feet up this tree.

Amos and the two Boggs men boost the power on their headlamps and methodically work their lights up the tree in search of a pair of eyes reflecting in the bright light. Coon hunters spend a good part of every night with their backs arched and heads bent toward the sky. We circle the tree and peer up into the highest branches while the dogs continue to jump and bawl, but we see nothing.

"They'd call that a blank or a slick tree in a competition. I'd lose points for that," Amos flashes a grin that says he doesn't really care. The dogs put on a good show, there are plenty of other coons across central Virginia and it's not even 7:00 p.m.

Although Amos rarely competes

in organized hunts, and he doesn't take breeding and selling too serious, coon hunting is big business. Todd Morgan, director of field operations for the United Kennel Club, says the number of participants in recreational hunts and UKC-sanctioned hunts has been rising. The UKC is an umbrella organization that includes a wide variety of hunting dogs, and Morgan says about a quarter-million dogs are registered with the UKC; the majority are coon dogs. That number has been pretty steady over the past several years, a fair indication that the number of coon hunters has remained stable, despite the general decrease in the number of all hunters.

"We sanctioned about 4,300 night hunts last year that ranged in size from small club contests to our largest annual event, Autumn Oaks, which draws as many as 25,000 people and 1,000 hunting dogs and



Raccoon hunters need strong backs and necks. They spend much of their nights looking skyward as they study a tree for the reflective eyes and ringed tail of a raccoon. Photos ©David Hart

about 400 show dogs," says Morgan.

Although the UKC sponsors these night hunts, they don't actually offer any prize money. Some contest sponsors do offer prizes, mostly hunting equipment and maybe some dog food, but Morgan says nobody enters these competitions to get rich. Some do, however, make decent money on the side by breeding championship dogs. He recalls one male, House's Lipper, a treeing Walker from Missouri, that sired 5,008 puppies over its long, happy life.

"Figure five or six puppies per lit-



Above: Many coon hunters don't even bother to carry a gun, because the treeing of a raccoon is all it takes to have a successful hunt. Below: Lee Amos (red helmet), Joe Boggs (black helmet) and Joseph Boggs (white helmet) have formed a longtime friendship through their hunting adventures. Photos ©David Hart

ter and about a \$400 stud fee and you're talking some pretty serious money," he says.

Morgan adds that championship dogs can sell for as much as \$5,000 to \$10,000, and he recalls one hound that brought a whopping \$65,000. All that, and most hunters don't even carry a gun.

"Our rules prohibit the taking of a raccoon during sanctioned hunts. If a hunter kills a coon during one of our events, he's banned from our organization. We just think it's bad for public relations and we also want to make sure there are enough coons for everyone who wants to hunt," he says. "The way our contests work, you don't need to kill a raccoon to earn points. Hunts are judged by

how fast the dogs strike, how fast they tree a raccoon and whether or not there is actually a raccoon in the tree the dogs are working. Points are also awarded based on the dog's handlers. It's up to the handler to decide when his dog has struck scent and when it's barking 'treed'. If he calls it wrong, he loses points or if the dog is barking up a tree without a raccoon in it, he loses points for that."

If Amos killed every coon he could, there wouldn't be many left. He hunts at least 20 nights a month; he starts in August and doesn't quit until sometime in April or May. And on a typical night, he'll tree at least two raccoons.

On this night, however, the younger Boggs carries an old scopeless Remington Nylon 66. No telling how many coons have tumbled out of a treetop from a well-placed shot from that old rifle, but over the past decade, it's been fewer and fewer. Amos doesn't mess with killing coons much anymore. They just aren't worth anything. Back in the 70s and 80s, a prime coonskin could bring as much as 30 dollars, enough to justify the time it takes to skin, flesh, and stretch a pelt. Now, you'd be lucky to make enough for a meal at a fast food restaurant.

"Every once in awhile, I'll kill one to help train the dogs. They need to smell a coon up close now and then just to remind them why we're out here," says Amos.

As the dogs wander off through another dark woodlot, they strike another fresh scent trail and start baying their deep, mournful bawls. It's that sound, along with the excitement and anticipation that comes with each chase, that reminds Amos why he's out here. □

David Hart is a freelance writer from Farmville. He is a regular contributor to Bassmaster, American Angler, Bass Pro Shops Outdoor World and many other national and regional publications. He is the author of Fly Fisher's Guide to Virginia, Including West Virginia's Top Waters (www.wildadv.com).





2004 Outdoor Calendar of Events

November 20, 2004: *Generation Deer Hunt*, Occoquan Bay National Wildlife Refuge. For youth ages 11-17. Contact Jimmy Mootz at 804-367-0656 or e-mail mootzj@dgif.state.va.us.

Nov 22, 2004: *Novice Deer Hunt*, Occoquan Bay National Wildlife Refuge. For the beginner hunter. Contact Jimmy Mootz at 804-367-0656 or e-mail mootzj@dgif.state.va.us.

Dec 4, 2004: *Youth Squirrel Hunting Workshop*, White Oak Mt. WMA. For information contact the VDGIF Forest Office at 434-525-7522.

Dec 20, 2004: *Generation Deer Hunt*, Occoquan Bay National Wildlife Refuge. For youth ages 11-17. Contact Jimmy Mootz at 804-367-0656 or e-mail mootzj@dgif.state.va.us. □

Video Review by Marika Byrd

Respect and Responsibilities: The Truth About Kids Who Hunt
Randall Eaton, PhD
Sacred Hunt Videos/Books
Randall Eaton Productions,
P.O. Box 280, Enterprise, OR 97828
541-426-0133
reaton@eoni.com
www.sacred-hunt.com
47 minutes, color DVD, VHS or Beta
Cost is \$25.00 includes S&H

The video begins, "If we teach our children to honor nature's gift, the joys and beauties of the outdoors will be here forever," by former President Jimmy Carter, in the Outdoor

Journal. The programming was developed in the Sacred Hunt three-part series to impart, "the positive influence on the development of our youth into compassionate, virtuous and responsible adults who respect life and protect nature."

Respect and Responsibilities uses generational speakers from youngsters to adults, in the autumn of life, and professionals. They converse and teach societal codes of conduct, usefulness of conserving and protecting the environment, competitiveness and other characteristics necessary to manage in the environment in which we all now exist.

The educational system teaches some of the above skills, but they are better obtained, retained and used when book knowledge is put to useful practice under the tutelage of and with good adult supervision by a parent, family member or a mentor. Over time, the practice leads to fine tuning of the attributes and allows them to become second nature.

For example, the orators say they learned: courage and patience as they wait until the animal comes within a good shot range to make a clean shot, or to quietly and simply wait it out on a tree stand, sitting on the ground or while quietly casing the hunting grounds until the game comes into range at their own pace and in their own time. They learned fortitude from hiking around the woods and terrain in search of game and then transporting their "trophy" out of the environs to their home.

Through safety education, the youth are taught and visually understand what the gun can do to an animal as well as a human. This is altogether different from the "neuro-stimulation" one gets from playing

Dungeons and Dragons or any of the hunting and war games on the computer and learning different, possibly destructive skills. The visual images and competition learned at the computer do not equate with the life skills learned and honed in the outdoors. At-risk youth are vulnerable and can develop reckless behaviors unless supervised or mentored to choose the right pathway to maturity and taught how to make appropriate judgments; some often wind up in trouble. Youth hunting is being taught to give the youngsters skills and to have a positive, respective and responsible approach while engaging in the sport and life around them.

The video points out that many of the leaders of Fortune 500 companies as well as world leaders are or have been hunters: U.S. Presidents Jimmy Carter, Theodore Roosevelt and South Africa's Nelson Mandela.

The running narrative is interspersed with many visuals on the sporting life, afield or astream, which substantiate the anecdotal passages. Imagine seeing the bald eagle swooping down, its talons grabbing a fish and then flying upward to find a "dinner table;" the cuddly black bear cub nestled on the game warden's shoulder waiting the bejeweling with a radio transmitter or the Big Horn rams challenging each other in a head-to-head confrontation. Not all of the video is hunting scenes. There are images of families enjoying the environment while wildlife watching, scenes around an Indian campfire powwow as tom toms sound in the background, watching a beautiful sunset across a placid body of water or canoeing across a serene lake.

Near the end you hear the old adage, "It is better to have loved...." which is adapted to "It is better to have hunted an animal and eaten it than never to have hunted" or fished. Persons in and for the outdoors have an emotional bond to the earth, one speaker says.

As pointed out in the video, hunting has been a way of life since the creation of Adam and Eve. Just as humans take the meat to eat, animals must engage in similar behavior in order to survive on this planet.

The hunting industry numbers 45 million in the United States (depending on whose data you use); it supports wildlife, the environment, as well as the economy through the sales of licenses and stamps, rods and reels, guns and ammo and sports outdoor wear. It is also a bigger industry than the 40 top grossing movies of all times coming out of Hollywood.

I am a non-hunter and fisher who found the video well written, well presented and the information timeless; it could even interest those who are not "hook and bullet" sports minded. It is a good stocking stuffer for the newcomer or the veteran in the hunting and fishing arena.

The video is a good teaching tool as well as useful as a refresher course, whether you are the youthful or the more seasoned hunter. It never hurts to see some things many times as you always pick up tips that were unnoticed the last time, or you may get a different interpretation or angle on what was viewed earlier.

Dr. Eaton is a professor at the University of Oregon. He has held faculty positions in zoology, psychology and humanities at the University of Washington, the University of Georgia and Florida Atlantic University. Additionally, the author has won two national book awards as well as numerous writing and film awards.

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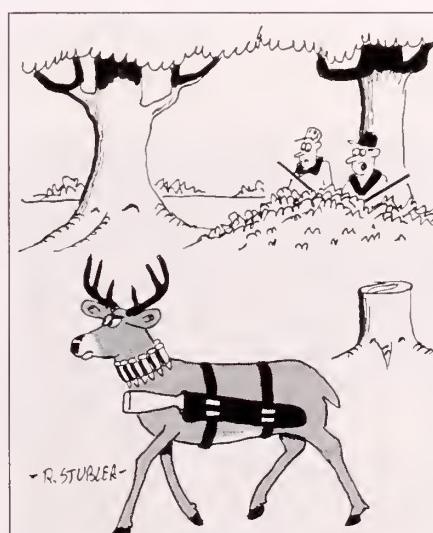


Timing Is Everything

by Jennifer Worrell

Steve Garvis, a game warden on the Eastern Shore, had spent a fruitless week waiting for spotlighters during a recent deer season. After giving up on the final evening of his patrol, he went home early and fixed a snack. Just as he was settling in his chair to watch *Law and Order*, he saw a truck creeping down his rural lane. His jaw dropped when the driver shined the field behind his neighbor's home. When a ringing shot drowned the opening credits of the show, Garvis ran out the door with one boot on and one boot in his arms. He jumped in his truck, sped down the lane, and made the arrest three miles from his house.

Garvis searched aimlessly for the slain deer until 3:00 a.m. when he gave up and went to bed. As fortune would have it, Garvis woke up the next morning to see the downed deer from his bedroom window, just a few yards further than his search led him the previous night. Nothing like armchair spotlighting patrol! □



"I think we're dealing with a different kind of deer, here."

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RECIPES

by Joan Cone

Dining on Small Upland Birds

Our smaller game birds are delicacies. Among these are woodcock, dove, quail and snipe. Let's begin with woodcock. They make for enjoyable hunting, as they sit tight for the dog. Unlike most birds, the breasts are dark, and the legs are white. This woodcock recipe works equally well for other small birds.

Menu

- Broiled Oysters
(Appetizers)*
- Curried Woodcock*
- Herb Roasted Potatoes*
- Sweet-Sour Beans And Carrots*
- Holiday Pumpkin Bread*

Broiled Oysters

- 1 dozen large oysters, in shell
- 1 strip bacon, finely chopped
- Worcestershire sauce
- Hot sauce
- Paprika

Open shells letting oyster remain in curved half; discard flat half. Arrange oysters in shallow baking pan. On each oyster put 1 to 2 drops Worcestershire and hot sauce, 3 to 4 bits of bacon and a sprinkle of paprika. Place in preheated broiler, 3 inches from flame. Broil until edges of oysters curl and bacon is done, 2 to 3 minutes.

Curried Woodcock

- 8 woodcock or 12 dove, split down back
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 1 teaspoon instant minced onion
- 1 tablespoon flour
- 1 can (10 ¼ ounces) chicken broth
- 1 teaspoon curry powder
- Salt to taste

Melt butter in large skillet or electric frypan and brown birds, breast side down. Turn and brown on opposite side. Remove birds from skillet. To drippings in skillet add onion and flour. Mix well and then gradually add chicken broth, stirring constantly. Add curry powder and salt. Return birds to skillet, cover, and simmer for 15 to 20 minutes or until fork tender. (Allow 2 woodcock per serving; 4 dove or snipe)

Herb Roasted Potatoes

- ½ cup Dijon mustard
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- Garlic powder to taste
- ½ teaspoon Italian seasoning
- 6 medium red skin potatoes, cut into chunks (about 2 pounds)

Mix all ingredients except potatoes in small bowl. Place potatoes in lightly greased 13x9x2-inch baking pan. Toss with mu-

tard mixture. Bake in a preheated 425° F. oven for 35 to 40 minutes or until potatoes are fork tender, stirring occasionally. Serves 4.

Sweet-Sour Beans and Carrots

- 1 cup sliced carrots
- 2 cups frozen, cut green beans
- 2 bacon strips, diced
- 1 medium onion, finely chopped
- 1 medium tart apple, peeled and diced
- 2 tablespoons cider vinegar
- 1 tablespoon sugar

Salt to taste

Place carrots in a large saucepan and cover with water. Bring to a boil. Cook, uncovered, for 4 minutes. Stir in beans and return to a boil. Cook mixture 5 to 6 minutes longer or until the beans and carrots are tender. Drain. In a large skillet, cook bacon over medium heat until crisp. Remove to paper towels to drain. Sauté onion in drippings until tender. Add the apple, vinegar, sugar and salt; mix well. Cover and cook until apples are tender, about 2 minutes. Stir in the bean mixture and heat through. Sprinkle with bacon. Serves 4.

Holiday Pumpkin Bread

- 3 ½ cups flour
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 2 teaspoons baking soda
- 1 teaspoon ground cloves
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon nutmeg
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 2 cups solid pack pumpkin
- 1 cup vegetable oil
- 3 cups sugar
- 3 eggs
- 1 cup chopped walnuts
- 1 cup raisins

Preheat oven to 350° F. Grease 2 loaf pans. In a medium bowl, mix together the flour, baking powder, soda, spices and salt. Set aside. In the bowl of an electric mixer, combine the pumpkin, oil, sugar and eggs. Mix until well blended. Add dry ingredients and mix well. By hand stir in the walnuts and raisins. Divide batter between prepared pans. Bake for 50 to 55 minutes or until a toothpick inserted into the center comes out clean. Cool in pans on a wire rack for 15 minutes. Remove from pans and cool completely. Makes 2 loaves. □





On The Water

by Jim Crosby

Boats Left Unattended

Unless you live aboard, there will always be a time when you must leave your boat unattended. Depending on your planning and preparation, this can be just a minor interlude between boating adventures or a total disaster.

In case you don't know it, Murphy's Law always applies to boats—you know that common law of human existence that says, "What can go wrong, will go wrong, when you least expect it." The one that slaps you across the face when you plan a boating adventure with new friends, and upon arrival at the boat, find it not ready to fulfill its role in the adventure.

Now, I am not talking about the dead battery kind of problem but the one where you find the boat setting on the bottom of its slip, or maybe a limb has crushed the keel of your canoe when it fell out of the tree in your backyard kind of problem—the kind of problem that you can't correct in a reasonable time to save the plan for the day.

This is the kind of problem that embarrasses you in front of your friends and can only end with an "I'm so sorry, we will have to plan this for another time." In the meantime, they are probably thinking, "Do we really want to go out in a boat with this guy?" Guess what? I think you just lost your credibility as a competent boater!

Murphy's Law will always be with us and the clue to controlling its effect on our lives is to concentrate on the "What can go wrong" part and reduce this to a minimal level. For example: You should always make sure the bilge pump can han-

dle the rain water so it doesn't collect in sufficient quantities to raise the waterline above the gunwale and, of course, never store your canoe under a tree where a dead limb can crush it.

While these seem to be the most basic, common sense considerations due your boat, we are often driven by life's unceasing demands to rush through the "items to be checked before leaving the boat list" and abandon our cherished possessions to become victims of Murphy's Law yet again.

Another of the common cases of the strike of Murphy's Law is spotting a boater's pride and joy sitting alongside the road without a tow vehicle. This is a boater's nightmare, especially when the craft is filled with electronics and other expensive items available for pilferage. This usually means a tire problem or a blown bearing without a spare or means of replacement.

We all know that things can hap-

pen even with good maintenance, but we can reduce the chances with advance planning that anticipates the workings of Murphy's Law like: When towing a boat, you should always carry a spare tire and set of bearings with the necessary tools to accomplish the replacement. I have been there without a spare tire, the jack to raise it and the lug wrench to fit the trailer. But even then, I didn't abandon my craft to the whims of the scavengers. I pulled the boat well off the road, disconnected my tow vehicle and sent my wife for the spare tire while I tended my victim of Murphy's Law. Not like the time I spotted a very nice boat on the side of the road with a well dressed lady sitting alone in the cockpit under a big sunbonnet. I guess it's a matter of whatever works best for you! [J]

Author's Note: I always enjoy feedback in the form of comments and suggestions. Please e-mail me at: jimcrosby@aol.com.



©Jim Crosby



Naturally Wild

story and illustration
by Spike Knuth

Its scientific name, *Aix sponsa*, can be translated "a water bird in bridal dress." The wood duck or "woodie" drake is indeed a beautiful creature with some very conspicuous and distinctive field marks. Its head and large crest are iridescent green and purple with thin white lines and white "forked" throat patch. Its lower neck and breast are a rich purplish-chestnut, marked with white. Its sides are yellowish-gray, marked with fine, black wavy lines, and its breast and sides are separated by a large black crescent-shaped mark preceded by a white one.

The female is beautiful in her own right. She is basically grayish to grayish-brown with markings of white on her sides, brownish breast speckled with white, a white throat, and white, tear shaped eye rings. She has a smaller crest of dark brownish-green.

The woodie has many other local

names including "acorn duck" because of its favorite food; "summer duck" because it nests in the same range in which it winters; "squealer" because of its unusual call; and "swamp duck" because of the habitat it favors. Wood duck is an appropriate name as well since it is always associated with trees and woodlands.

The wood duck is a native of North America with its range covering mainly the deciduous forests of the eastern half of the country, mainly the Atlantic and Mississippi flyways. There is a separate population on the Pacific Coast. It favors brushy-edged or wooded freshwater ponds, lakes and streams, hardwood bottoms of oak and gum-cypress swamps, or other mast-producing woods. They pair up in late-winter and begin seeking nesting sites as soon as they reach their breeding grounds. In Virginia they



Wood Duck

Aix sponsa

are actively seeking sites in mid-February. They prefer to nest in tree cavities, especially old pileated woodpecker holes, although it has taken readily to man-made boxes. The hen may choose a nest hole near the ground or as high as 60 feet up! Here she'll lay 10 to 15 eggs in a bed of wood chips, sawdust and down from her own breast.

Once hatched, the young must leave the nest hole. With the help of sharp claws and hooked bill nail, they are able to climb up to the nest opening. One by one they are called and they jump out of their high-rise home, bouncing unhurt off the ground like little balls of cotton. The hen leads them quickly to water where they depend heavily on aquatic and terrestrial insects for food at first, turning to vegetation then aquatic seeds then to small acorns and other mast and seeds.

After about eight weeks, the young are able to fly. Now they join other grown young and adults, threading their way through the trees, swiftly and surely. The groups now wander from feeding grounds to roosting areas, feeding mainly on acorns, but also beechnuts, hickory, a variety of aquatic plant seeds and other wild fruits. Most northern breeding woodies migrate southward by late-October. In Virginia many remain on their breeding range and may stay all winter if there isn't too much ice cover on the waters for too long. The wood duck responds well to simple wildlife management practices and is doing well in Virginia. □



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